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ABSTRACT

After H.L. Mencken in a 1920 essay labeled the American South "the Sahara of the Bozart," the journalist Gerald Johnson debated with him the merits of southern intellectual life primarily as indicated in southern literature. There were noteworthy southern artists, journalists, social anthropologists, and educators, ranging from the scholars surrounding noted sociologist Howard Odum at the University of North Carolina to the "fugitive" writers in and around Vanderbilt University. In southern education, liberal figures like college presidents William Louis Poteat (Wake Forest University) and Harry Woodburn Chase (University of North Carolina) readily fit the progressive label, along with education pioneers such as Wil Lou Gray, who started a vocational school that sparked the technical education movement in South Carolina and Cora Wilson Stewart, a founder of the Kentucky Literacy Commission. The progressive movement in the South, however, meant "progressive for whites only." The paper considers in detail the accomplishments of Laura Bragg, the first woman in the country to direct a museum, and of John Andrew Rice, the founder of Black Mountain College, and discusses the idea of the museum as a progressive educational institution. Contains 74 notes. (NKA)

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TENACIOUS SOUTHERN PROGRESSIVES:

CONFOUNDING MENCKEN'S MYTH OF MEDIOCRITY

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Education Research Association, Montreal, Canada, April 1999. Contact for citation: Louise Allen: LOUA373@AOL.COM or Katherine Reynolds: KCREYNOLDS@EMAIL.COM

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TENACIOUS SOUTHERN PROGRESSIVES:

CONFOUNDING MENCKEN'S MYTH OF MEDIOCRITY

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When H.L. Mencken labeled the American South "the Sahara of the Bozart," in a 1920 essay about its placement as "a vast plain of mediocrity, stupidity, lethargy, almost of dead silence," he was eloquent, bold, and audacious.[1] He was also wrong. Journalist Gerald Johnson, then a fairly obscure writer with the Greensboro, NC, News but later a nationally known commentator, was the first to widely herald the error. In a rejoinder he titled "The Congo, Mr. Mencken," published in the popular journal The Reviewer, Johnson countered that the South was not an arid desert, but a jungle alive with activity and teeming with variety.[2]

Johnson and Mencken debated the merits of southern intellectual life primarily as indicated in southern literature, and Johnson allowed that his Congo analogy was not meant to be all favorable. He viewed the South as a jungle of thought and writing that was often "too rich and curious" in a somewhat rambling and disorganized nature that accommodated all manner of lesser competence, but was by no means devoid of greatness. Just as there were ample orchids hidden in the jungle, there were minds like Edgar Allan Poe, Sidney Lanier, and James Branch Cabell in the South.[3]

The Congo image of the South during the era of American progressivism, generally the first third of the twentieth century, is an apt metaphor well beyond literary accomplishment. Ultimately,

it included a group with which Gerald Johnson himself has been identified: "Carolinians who have long been called 'progressive' or 'national' as opposed to strictly 'southern' in spirit."[4] This group was part of a larger colony of artists, journalists, social anthropologists, and educators whose noteworthy members ranged from the scholars surrounding noted sociologist Howard Odum at the University of North Carolina to the "fugitive" writers in and around Vanderbilt University including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Donald Davidson. In southern education, liberal figures like college presidents William Louis Poteat (Wake Forest) and Harry Woodburn Chase (University of North Carolina) readily fit the progressive labels, along with pioneers like Wil Lou Gray, who started a vocational school that sparked the technical education movement in South Carolina, and Cora Wilson Stewart, a founder of the Kentucky Literacy Commission and organizer of the innovative "moonlight" schools.

Not all the southern reformers truly fit the label "progressive," as applied to the movement that had started in the middle-class white urban North. Paternalistic in design and execution, the progressive movement in the South meant "progressive for whites only," according to "the most ancient historian of Southern progressivism," Vann Woodward.[5] While the southern progressive movement offered reformers a guarantee that the poor white masses would be rescued from apathy and ignorance, the major problem for many "progressives" was how to make sure that blacks did not share equally in the educational system. While southern education did not entirely neglect black schooling, educational inequality was institutionalized long before World War I.

Two primary concerns distinguished the southern brand of progressivism from the northern variety. The South was very rural and very poor. Laura Bragg, a transplanted northerner, underscored the effects of southern isolation and poverty when she wrote of it to the General Education Board:

> In spite of the educational efforts of the last few years, people outside the centers are more backward than those of the north, and there is at present, along with an awakening of spirit and desire for knowledge, a reactionary tendency which is inclined to direct this spirit conservatively.

Bragg's points were valid. In the 1930 census, more than 78% of the residents of South Carolina still lived in rural areas and the public education system in the state had proven woefully inadequate well into the first decades of the twentieth century. [6]

Thus, while progressive education in the early twentieth century South could be found, it could not easily be located in one place or in one method of practice. It was a collection of anecdotal and far flung endeavors, diverse in philosophical direction and experimental in intention. Rather than adhering to new professional ideals sparked by William James, John Dewey and others, educational progressivism in the South took multiple directions toward experiments that could be loosely defined as "liberal" or simply "new." As such, this southern progressivism was more dependent on individual educational leaders of vision and tenacity than it was on the adaptation of new and recognized modes of operation that had been successful elsewhere. Like much about the South, early twentieth century progressivism was intensely personal and substantially influenced by the experiences and personalities of individuals who forged new paths in education and elsewhere.

Two pioneering educators of the South appropriately demonstrate the region's particular brand of progressivism: Laura Bragg, the first woman in the country to direct a museum (in Charleston, SC) and the first to develop the Southern museum movement as a powerful community educational outreach tool; and John Andrew Rice, the founder of the renowned progressive experiment in higher education, Black Mountain College. These two progressives provide examples of the reaches of reform in a region where it had seemed so unlikely for so long. Quite obviously, those reaches extended beyond gender barriers when led by individuals of commitment

and audacity. And, interestingly, Bragg managed to influence southern progressivism from the position of the transplanted northerner, while Rice was born and raised in the South. Importantly, the two constructed different ways of dealing with ignorance and rural isolation that had long defeated attempts at southern reforms. Bragg took an activist stance to challenge that isolation by providing equal educational services to both black and white schools and by bringing to rural school children experiences once available only in sophisticated urban settings. Rice, on the other hand, embraced isolation by founding a college in the midst of its beauty and setting up there a democratic learning community of students, faculty, and celebrated visitors.

Together, Rice and Bragg offer important examples of approaches to educational progressivism in the South. Their experiences give credence to the notion that progressive accomplishments did, indeed, occur in the South, but may have been overlooked due to their lack of philosophical or operational coherence and their substantial reliance on individual influence.

Laura Bragg: Progressivism Embedded in New England Ideals

Laura Bragg's understanding of Progressivism was shaped by her early life experiences as a Methodist minister's daughter in New England. Both parents were role models of progressive ideals; her father was a member of the American Association of Colored Youth and her mother was the president of the local Women's Christian Temperance Union. Leaving the small towns and villages of her youth behind, Bragg sought both independence and a college education in Boston, a city far away from her father and her home. Her father's encouragement in her intellectual growth as a young child had already marked her as different from many other young women. Her vision for her future was further broadened through the classical education she received at Simmons College.

This pursuit of intellectualism through a college education was creating new possibilities as well as role expectations for many women during this period of America's history.

Bragg understood these possibilities. She made friends with other New Women at Simmons College, and with the professors, who were members of the first generation of New Women. The years of Bragg's college education, from 1902 through 1906, in Boston were exhilarating and transformative ones—for the city, her college, and for Bragg herself. She witnessed the effects of the Progressive Era on the city's museums, as she was a frequent visitor in them. She also interned at the Boston Museum of Natural History during some of her college courses. Additionally, she visited art galleries with her new friends and alone, always learning and absorbing.

Another sign of the Progressive Era's influence in the city and at the college was the opening of the nation's second school for social workers at Simmons College in 1904, during Bragg's junior year.[7] Bragg recalled doing some social settlement work in Boston that proved to be useful as her first position was at a social service library on Orr's Island, Maine.[8] Using her library degree and her knowledge, Bragg tried to open the world to these islanders where she lived for two years. Eventually, the fierce climate drove her away to New York City and a post at the Public Library. Ultimately the climate of another city would draw her and it would hold her. It was in Charleston where she found her calling, her mission. The city, its museum, and its residents were waiting for her.

Bragg was a Northern New Woman and representative of many Northern middle-class women of the Progressive Era. She received a college degree, and became part of a new profession, the museum worker.[9] While at the same time, many Southern New Women were graduating with degrees from Southern institutions that offered a finishing school education and not a classical one and becoming teachers, social workers, or nurses—in the tending, caring

professions.CITE It was almost another twenty years after Bragg came South "that Southern culture permitted more diversity in female roles."[7]

With her forthrightness, Bragg was different from other Southern women reformers as they still understood that men were in control and that a certain amount of deference was necessary if one wished to achieve one's goals. Many of those Southern New Women were married and had children, but few, if any operated without family wealth, power, and position in the community to support them.. Their reform activities consumed whatever time was left after attending to home and motherhood responsibilities.[8]

Thus Bragg is particular to the times, especially in the South, where few influential women were successful without the support of a man or a family in achieving their civic and political goals. Bragg was a woman who lived by her brains, with her status in the community established by her own professional efforts and not those of her father, her brother or a husband. She was an anomaly, the outlyer, in this region of the country. Her willingness to move far away from her father and her family in order to achieve professional success as well as her aggressiveness, forthrightness, and her dogged determination as a museum director mark her as vastly different from other Southern women. She was so unlike Southern women that she intimidated many Southern men.

The Museum as a Progressive Educational Institution

The progressive reform movement and its followers believed solutions to the societal conditions of abuse and injustice lay with the expansion of state intervention.[9] First conceived in the growing middle-class white urban environment of the North, reform reshaped public life not just in that region but across the nation. Paradoxically reformers embraced uplift and progress, while they also believed in a hierarchy of race and culture; and they avidly embraced democracy

while endorsing coercion and control to achieve their goals. For them, reform could only come through state intervention and control.[10]

As a movement in both the North and the South, progressive reform touched the cultural, social, and political institutions of both regions. Spanning thirty years in the North and almost forty years in the South, the Progressive Era and its reformers created new agencies that would reshape life across the nation.[11] One of these agencies was a recreated museum as a public institution, which responded to the great educational needs of the immigrants and rural poor.

While there were few immigrants in the South in 1909 when Bragg arrived in Charleston, there was great poverty and ignorance among both blacks and whites. As a missionary and social worker, Bragg recognized the possibilities for social change. The impoverished city virtually existed as it had since the years after the Civil War, with the same families ruling the social power structure.[12] What she saw in Charleston, however, was an adventure and an opportunity for new experiences, because she believed that the citizens were thirsting for knowledge. She also recognized a challenge, "The obvious ignorance was divine. They needed me. Like young Alexander the Great before me, I saw worlds to conquer," Bragg said in an interview late in her life.[13]

Through the educational programs instituted at The Charleston Museum, Bragg attempted to give the people the same opportunities she had experienced growing up in New England. In effect she was offering the promise of American life (from her New England perspective) to the ordinary citizen through The Charleston Museum. Her educational programs as extension activities for the school system were created to provide the masses with educational opportunities. She wanted to Americanize the Southerners who did not know even the heroes and myths of our culture as she wrote Mayor Grace on one occasion: "...Do you know most of the children who come to the

Museum for the story hours know nothing of the stories that are the heritage of our race, the old Greek myths, the stories of King Arthur, German folklore, Irish legends and the Norse sagas."[14]

With the Museum's Director, Dr. Paul Rea, filling two faculty positions at different institutions of higher learning, Bragg was presented with the perfect opportunity to transform a scientific, academic museum into a public institution that was dedicated to education. In the long view, there are some who could say she used the Museum as an engine for social change in Charleston, doing good for ordinary people on a massive scale, or that she attempted an intellectual revolution through the traveling school exhibits, libraries, art classes, lectures, and films.

Revolutions "have always been limited by the social settings in which they take place."[15] In the Holy City, class, race, and gender framed Bragg's revolution for herself and for others. Race was not dealt with it at the Museum until the early 1920s. It was an institution for whites only, until Bragg became the Museum's Director and changed that in 1921 when she opened it to blacks one afternoon a week. And Bragg's traveling school exhibits first reached the city's black schools in 1913, four years after they were in use in the white schools. These black schools were overcrowded, substandard to the white schools, and offered fewer textbooks and other educational tools for students and teachers.[16] The "Bragg boxes" were truly windows on the world for the black students.

As a social reformer, Bragg understood the tremendous impact the traveling school exhibits had. Through these windows, she was able to expose children to countries, cultures, and nature they would never have experienced. As a means to an end, they accomplished her primary goal, which was to bring the adults into the Museum. But viewed from the perspective of eighty years later, they are examples of Progressive social reform. "Bragg boxes" were an attempt to end the apathy and ignorance of school children. She hoped that they would become educated adults who would visit the museum and bring their children.[17]

With Bragg's intent to educate the children into adults, she also wanted patrons outside of the county borders to learn the story of the Museum and the educational services it offered to them. Just months after being named the Director in 1920, she sent Helen von Kolnitz, her hand-picked successor as Curator of Books and Public Instruction, to the Tri-County Fair at Andrews and to the State Fair in Columbia to demonstrate the traveling exhibits and to showcase the museum's programs. A huge banner proclaimed, "The Charleston Museum brings the Life of the World to You, Help the Museum to Preserve a Record of Our South Carolina Life for the World."[18]

At this time (1921) the state was still significantly rural, with only eighteen percent of the population residing in urban areas.[19] Von Kolnitz estimated that between fifteen and twenty thousand people viewed the banner and the booth at the fair in Columbia, thus alerting potential patrons to the Museum and its services. "Most of whom knew nothing about the Museum," and since there was an "absolute lack of cultural advantages in certain illiterate sections of South Carolina," she thought it would be difficult for any one to understand what it meant to those people to see the Museum's exhibit.[20] While the fair-goers passed other display booths with only a glance, they lingered at the Museum's exhibit, finding it both fascinating and educational.[21]

Bragg's plans for the Museum were in agreement with one of the major points of the progressive movement, which was the reform of education, "...as a part of a vast humanitarian effort to supply the promise of American life."[22] Indeed, social reformers such as John Dewey looked to the schools as a means of preserving and promoting democracy within the new social order. Dewey believed that the end of education was growth, which was a part of a democratic society. And school was a "form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends."[23]

Bragg's museum programs gave her an extensive sphere of influence within the educational community, though she had no formal training as an educator. There had been little professionalization of education in the South by 1910, when Bragg's influence within the smaller educational community of Charleston began. Her traveling school exhibits and her nature study course for elementary schools gave her the opportunity to practice progressive educational reform, á la Dewey, without extensive understanding of education or pedagogical training. Even though Bragg was not trained as a teacher, her invention of "Bragg boxes" were accepted as educationally sound by teachers and administrators, and continued to be used well into the 1970s in the Charleston schools. She practiced progressive reform through the museums and the educational extension activity of the traveling school exhibits.

Bragg recreated The Charleston Museum, a Southern institution, into a Northern progressive agency of social reform, responding to the great educational needs of the rural and isolated citizens of the city and the county. In a February 1919 letter to her father, Bragg commented about then Governor Cooper whose focus was on education and his slogan was "no illiteracy." While she also wrote that the city had "provided teachers and schools day and night for the elimination of it all, she lamented, "Of course the difficulty is to get the illiterates to change their status." Literacy was of great concern, because in 1910, while almost 35% of the black population were classified as illiterate, fewer than 4% of Charleston's white population were illiterate.[24]

One is left to wonder the effectiveness of any campaign against illiteracy, especially in the black community. In 1920, while the illiteracy rate in the United States for those twenty-one years of age and over was just over 7%, in South Carolina it was 23%. Though Charleston County's illiteracy rate for whites was even lower (it was less than 2%), the rate for blacks was staggering—nearly 34%, or almost thirty-three times the rate of whites.[25]

Her broad educational programs were designed for the ordinary citizens, black and white, providing them with the Progressives' definition of uplift and progress. Thus, the museum became an educational institution with a social and cultural focus. Seeing the museum as an engine for social change, Bragg turned The Charleston Museum into a social settlement house by offering plays, lectures, art classes, and educational programs. She employed progressive social ideals, always working for the betterment of the citizens.

As a municipal institution, the museum relied on both city and county funds to operate. With the city close to bankruptcy in 1926, she was forced to go beyond her own sphere of political influence to look for money to support the Museum's educational programs. Bragg's dogged determination carried her through four years of battle for funding with the state's political leaders. Dealing with this issue of financial support for both the school exhibits and other museum activities was a continual worry for Bragg. She petitioned her museum friends for political support, which they willingly gave, and she bargained with the state's Superintendent of Education who played politics with her request. After just one business lunch at the Country Club of Charleston, Bragg and Superintendent Hope engaged in a war of wills. She wrote him, telling him what she would do, and what she would not do as the Museum's Director. And she also informed him what the Charleston County Delegation would do at her request. Rarely did Hope respond to her letters, and he frequently used intermediaries to communicate with her. Quite possibly she was unlike any woman he had ever known, Southern or not.[26] Finally it was Bragg's association with Clark Foreman of the Rosenwald Fund that provided the money to support both the museum's educational programs as well as Charleston's Free Library.

Mentoring With an End in Mind

With an acute sense of the future and the needs of the museum profession, Bragg's critical eye and her ability to recognize unusual talent allowed her to identify and mentor several young people. She nurtured their special gifts in ways that proved useful for her museum work. Anyone she mentored, and that was nearly every young person of a certain class who came to the Museum, became her student. These relationships, excepting two, continued with Bragg throughout their lives, with her outliving them all. Yet she was their teacher and she was always "Miss Bragg" to them.

Social class determined who belonged to the Museum and participated in its activities. It also determined the early members of the junior section of Natural History Society. Ned Hyer, Ned Jennings, Burnham and Rhett Chamberlain were all young adults Bragg worked with and mentored, beginning in 1909. Two other women, Helen von Kolnitz and Helen McCormack, became her girls later than this first group but that did not alter their devotion to her.

Fond of those who were weak in body or spirit but strong in mind or heart, Bragg especially embraced eleven-year-old Ned Jennings. The son of the local postmaster, Bragg recalled this "little boy with a cleft palate that couldn't talk plain"[27] whose father was blind to the boy's artistic strength hidden by a frail body. One of Bragg's first "boys," Ned helped her raise ten thousand silk cocoons as she encouraged his interests in painting and drawing.[28] This would be a mentorship that she nurtured throughout Jennings' short life, inspiring him to seek new art and art forms for the Museum.

The second Ned (Hyer), who was also a member of the junior section of the Natural History Society, approached her during her third year in the city about the museum's support in attending taxidermy school. Bragg wrote Rea, "it might be worth our while to develop this boy. He seems to

me fitted for just such work if he can acquire the artistic knowledge as well as the mechanical."[29] At age thirty-one, Bragg had found her sense of self, and she now had enough confidence in her ability to assess people and in her relationship with Rea to write him this letter, knowing he would trust her judgment. After completing the training, Ned returned to the city and his old post at the Museum.

While the city, nation and world were at war, Bragg was busy urging the modern poetry on one of her "girls," Helen von Kolnitz, who had written verse (and was to later become poet laureate of South Carolina with her collection *Danger Never Sleeps*) since her school days. This new interest of modern poetry further established Bragg's relationship with the city's social elite. And it was through her group of girl poets and John Bennett's group of male poets that the South Carolina Poetry Society was formed in 1920.

Later that same year, Bragg became the Museum's Director. Ned Hyer was named her assistant, and Helen von Kolnitz became the Curator of Public Instruction. Thus Bragg was supported by each protégé in two areas of her administration of the Museum. Hyer was her shadow and Helen was her hand-picked successor for the educational work which was Bragg's major focus for the Museum. Within two years though, Helen and Hyer would marry, have Bragg's god-child, and Hyer would be dismissed from the Museum's staff from financial misuse of Museum funds. Bragg disingenously claimed that Helen was the only person she was aware of that hated her and wanted her dead. One Ned and one Helen left her life in 1923 and by the end of that same year, their roles as a Bragg "boy" and "girl" were filled by the other Ned who reentered her life and a new Helen.

When Edward I. R. "Ned" Jennings returned to Charleston in mid-1923, the city was in a Florentine renaissance. The Poetry Society, Footlight Players, a Charleston symphony, and the

Etchers Club were all in full flower. As a graduate of Columbia University, Ned had taken an additional year of stage and costume design at Carnegie Technical Institute.[30] In Charleston, under Bragg's and Bennett's watchful eyes and through the support of the Museum and the Poetry Society, Ned's provocative and enigmatic artistry flourished. Reflecting a Dionysian spirit, his work conveyed messages of clarity and expressiveness denied him by his cleft palette. That January his mask of Pan was exhibited at the Nashville Art Gallery and there was a special exhibit at Charleston's Gibbes Art

Appreciative of his tremendous talent, Bragg had named Ned Curator of Art at the Museum and was well aware of Ned's frantic pace and varied interests:

> suddenly compelled to make a mask at 3 a.m. [then]... spend from breakfast to lunch in research reading and card cataloging reference notes.... spend days on the beach in a make-believe world with jelly-fish and sea-horses, whales in guide of Prince Ministers, sharks as Lord Chancellors.... [and maintaining] a systematic collection of butterflies and moths.[31]

Two other Bragg's "boys" and "girls" were also working in the Museum under her tutelage. Burnham Chamberlain, one of the original junior Natural History members, now headed the preparation department where he prepared and mounted bird and animal skins and Bragg's newest "girl" Helen McCormack was in charge of the South Carolina Culture Department.

In 1926, Bragg taught at Columbia University, spreading her progressive ideas about museum administration. And this second Helen who had begun as a volunteer in 1923 was now her special protégé. For it was this Helen one who was sent first to Highlands, North Carolina to begin a small biological museum there under Bragg's watchful eye, and then in 1927, Bragg sent her to Richmond, Virginia, to oversee the renovation and re-establishment of the Valentine Museum. Eventually, this apt student of Bragg became the Director of the Valentine and for ten years operated it just as Bragg had The Charleston Museum.

Just before Helen left for Richmond, Bragg's long-term partner committed suicide. In the wake of dealing with her feelings of remorse, Bragg met a new someone who would not only teach her and keep her stimulated, but who was also willing to learn about Charleston and American culture from her. A Chinese student was attending the Citadel and since Bragg believed that "Chinese culture and Chinese history ought to be of special interest to us all these days and are particularly so to me....," it was fortuitous that Bragg may have been directed to the Citadel or she may have found her Tsing Hua student on her own.[32]

Within three months of Belle's death, by Christmas time, her "China boy," Chia Mei, was spending ten days out at Snug Harbor with her. And by March, Bragg was writing people that she had, "in a sense, adopted a student who is at the Citadel."[33] Her "China Boy," Chia Mei became increasingly important in Bragg's life, as she did in his.. He wrote her the week after his 1926 Christmas vacation, "...I was almost moved to tears on thinking of the motherly love you have shown me....Visions of your charming house and the delightful Snug Harbor are before me as I write to thank you for the pleasure of your charming house and the delightful Snug Harbor."[34] He began calling her "Tama which is a common respectable Chinese term to address women of the age of one's mother; 'Ta' means big, 'Ma' means almost life most mother."[35]

Bragg's group of bright young things grew in numbers in the fall of 1927, when four additional Chinese students joined Chia Mei at the Citadel. In her quest to learn about Chinese culture, and all things Chinese, she also carried on a "voluminous correspondence" with a friend of Chia Mei's who attended a Northern college and was a "rabid advocate of the Cantonese cause."[36] These five Chinese students were known around Charleston as "Laura's babies" and most people thought it was strange that she chose to adopt them as she did.[37]

Bragg poured affection and understanding into these relationships. They cherished all that she did for them, "you really are the only one who are [sic] so kind to us...in this country."[38] Another Chinese cadet expressed his feelings:

> your sympathy and thought for others, your care for your friends, and your spirit of sacrificing for others have been too strong for you to be balanced by the thought of your own welfare and health....Whenever I think of your constant kindness and warm friendship toward me, I could not find enough words to describe my obligation and gratefulness to you."[39]

Chia Mei attended church events with Helen McCormack and escorted both her and Bragg's secretary to other social occasions in Charleston.[40] And all five Chinese students enjoyed using her marsh retreat, Snug Harbor, as well as her house at 38 Chalmers Street while Bragg was away during the summers, either teaching museum studies at Columbia University or visiting her mother at Epping.

Bragg set many tongues wagging in the homes on high Battery when she invited respectable young ladies to meet the cadets at her home on Chalmers Street or at picnics at her marsh retreat, Snug Harbor. A Charlestonian, whose mother allowed her older sister to socialize with the cadets, recalled that at that time Charleston society was not broad-minded enough to accept the students, considering them "colored." These respectable young ladies would be contaminated if they talked to the Chinese.[41]

Bragg attempted to open Charleston society to the Chinese through the formation of the Ta-Tung Club. It was designed as a cultural organization to introduce them to Charleston society and to teach white Southerners about Chinese culture through lectures as well as at the museum's story hours which were given by the Chinese students or by Bragg.[42] As with all of her protégés, it was her intent to have the Chinese to participate in the museum world which she controlled. And it was also her intent to have them both teach her as well as others and to learn from her as she did with

all of her relationships. But for the Chinese students, the club cultivated a friendship that was "sacred or ideal...there is no other motive...except mutual understanding and mutual appreciation," and they saw it as "a remarkable and unprecedented event in the history of the Americo-Chinese friendship."[43]

John Andrew Rice: Progressivism Rooted in Southern Anti-Intellectualism

John Andrew Rice, the founding patriarch of one of the most renowned and progressive experiments in higher education, Black Mountain College (near Asheville, NC), readily exemplified the intuitive and impulsive nature of progressive educational philosophies in the South. Born in South Carolina and educated in Tennessee and in Louisiana before accepting a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, Rice founded Black Mountain College in 1933 to implement *his own* ideas about education. Those ideas were rooted in a variety of personal educational experiences and sifted through a natural well-spring of cynicism about institutions. Included among them and installed at Black Mountain College were: the adaptation of emotional development as an important educational aim; the value of experiential learning; the contribution of social and cultural community outside the classroom; the centrality of artistic experience to support learning in any discipline; the need for democratic governance shared among faculty and students; and the efficiency of lean and loosely structured administration.[44]

As Rice himself noted later in life, most of these notions grew from personal experiences and observations as a student and as a young teacher. [45] He implemented them in the South not with any agenda for bringing reform to the region, but because the South was the place of his boyhood attachment and the location of an ideal and available campus site. In a fit of pragmatism upon first inspecting the group of potential campus buildings owned by the YMCA on a panoramic

Blue Ridge hillside outside the town of Black Mountain, Rice exclaimed, "It was perfect.... Here was peace. Here was also central heating against the cold of winter, blankets, sheets, dishes, flatware, enough for a dozen colleges, all at a moderate rental...." [46]

Thus, Rice's approach to progressive education was indebted to his natural talent for developing new concepts from reflections on experience, to his ability to brilliantly articulate those concepts to others, and to his commitment to testing his ideas in a real life setting. He was not particularly eager to show the world a better way through "progressive education," nor was he eager to transplant the ideas of other progressive educators to Black Mountain. He simply wanted the opportunity to shrug off the heavy hand of academic administration and to try out some things he had thought about. As he frequently later insisted, "Black Mountain College wasn't an experiment; it was an experience."[47] Since that experience took place in the southwestern mountains of North Carolina, however, it offers evidence for the premise that progressive education could and did flourish in the South; however, it was perhaps most evident in instances that were scattered and personality driven, rather than collectively purposeful.

When Rice was born, in 1888, much of the South was still reeling from the surrender at Appomattox and still pining for the stable economy of king cotton and slave labor. Rice's family, on his mother's side, presided over "Tanglewood," a classic southern plantation in the midlands portion of South Carolina. His father, whose less prosperous family was from the humid low country southwest of Charleston, was a Methodist pastor who would eventually become the president of Columbia Female College and a founding faculty member of Southern Methodist University. [48] Rice's earliest educational experiences included sermons from the pulpit, long conversations on the ever-present wide front porches, and chats with "Uncle Melt," an aging former slave still residing at Tanglewood who welcomed young Rice's participation in "the inconsequential

talk of the very old and the very young." With a ready laugh and a readiness to listen, Uncle Melt had a gift for asking interesting questions and sucking quietly on his corncob pipe while young John Andrew spun his answers.[49]

After moves with his parents and two younger brothers to various parsonage lodgings throughout South Carolina and eventually to Alabama, and after the death of his mother and arrival of his stepmother, a 17-year-old John Andrew Rice embarked on his first memorable encounter with an educational institution -- a preparatory academy in Bell Buckle, Tennessee, called the Webb School. There, he discovered the heroic teacher who would convince him of a notion that he incorporated in his progressive ideals, "In the process of educating, the teacher is the most important person."[50] John Webb ("Old Jack"), who joined his brother Sawney in founding the Webb School, approached teaching as a high calling as he guided students through advanced Latin, trigonometry, calculus, Greek and history. The boys and girls circled him in his study to hear him read from something that might seem unconnected at first to their classes, waiting eagerly for him to make a connection or to probe for one from the students. Rice recalled, "Silence was also speech with him. He had the wisdom seldom to complete a though for others." [51]

When Rice left for college at Tulane University, he hoped "Perhaps, although general talk stirred misgivings, there would be another John Webb, some professor who would tilt his chair and make a little circle of light." [52] Instead, he found a place bent on counting by Carnegie units and keeping score by grades -- a situation that sparked progressive, if romantic, notions of colleges designed to motivate learning over grades and interests over requirements. He often pointed at the expression "to get an education" as symptomatic of the attitude at the majority of educational experiences in the United States.[53]

Rice found an opportunity to further his education about education when, after conquering his Tulane B.A. in three years, he was selected a Rhodes Scholar from Louisiana. At Oxford, he experienced the reaches of independent scholarship backed by the availability of superb dons and tutors. There were no required textbooks, no prescribed courses, no units to be accumulated. Lectures were frequent and stirring, but optional. They were simply resources for discovering interests and gaining advanced knowledge. There were, however, clear expectations about learning that were tested by preliminary examinations at the end of the first year and by grueling final examinations -- oral and written -- at the end of three or four years. Early Rhodes Scholar Frank Aydelotte, later president of Swarthmore College, described the system as "wonderfully simple -- the method is to prescribe not what the undergraduate is supposed to take, but what he is supposed to know."[54] John Andrew Rice perhaps discovered more about the value of treating students as adults and of encouraging independent learning than he gleaned from his own studies in jurisprudence. However, in jurisprudence, he and fellow Rhodes Scholar Edwin Hubble both were awarded the coveted first class honors for their excellence upon examination.[55]

Socrates and Serendipity in a New Career

If the southern pattern of bringing progressive ideals to educational settings was less deliberate and more equivocal than elsewhere, it was not completely devoid of professional networking and the transfer of practices noted in the North and Middle West. Rice returned to his beloved South after the first dozen years of an academic career that included stints as a professor of classics at the University of Nebraska and New Jersey College for Women. He lighted at Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida, where president Hamilton Holt had arrived from New York in 1925 to mastermind the transformation of a struggling campus into a well-funded example of new

processes in higher education. To Holt, the South seemed an appropriate place to innovate with curriculum and structure that followed none of the old rules. He pioneered the notion of classes as "conferences" occurring for several hours at a stretch -- a perfect setting for Rice's brilliant and Socratic teaching. Students in the small town college were very much a community, and faculty-student interaction was valued and frequent.[56] When Rice arrived at Rollins in 1930, the tiny campus was considered as innovative as Swarthmore College with its honors program, Antioch College with its work-study experiment, and the University of Wisconsin with its classic text experiment guided by Alexander Meiklejohn.

By 1931, Rice was able to begin some productive networking when Rollins hosted a national conference on progressive higher education, chaired by John Dewey and attended by the presidents of Antioch, Sarah Lawrence, Lehigh, and others. Although he took to John Dewey immediately, Rice found many progressives, including Rollins president Hamilton Holt, more inclined toward the show than the substance of new curriculum and pedagogy. Dewey, in fact, impressed Rice as one of the few progressive educators he admired--"the only man I have every known who was completely fit and fitted to live in a democracy.... He had respect for the process of learning. He had it because he had respect for people."[57]

Informal occasions for Rice to keep abreast progressive endeavors outside the South occurred frequently through his wife, whose brother was the highly regarded president of Swarthmore College, Frank Aydelotte. The Rollins "conference" format of class scheduling also provided ample opportunities for Rice to practice and polish his notable Socratic teaching skills, to interact frequently with students outside the classroom, and to reach out to the nearby community where he became an early source of encouragement to Zora Neale Hurston and others. On the other hand, the outspoken Rice also found opportunities to voice objections to the policies and practices

of Rollins' authoritarian president Hamilton Holt. Holt followed an extensive campus building program with a 30 percent cut in faculty salaries during the Depression, and he frequently ignored the advice of the faculty advisory committees he appointed. Rice, no stranger to stinging candor and vocal criticism, got impatient and strident. He also got fired.[58]

Rice's termination from Rollins gave birth to a nationally publicized investigation by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), with Arthur Lovejoy at the helm of the inquiry team. Mud slinging from both sides, even prompting students and trustees to draw battle lines, eventually resulted in the termination of six additional faculty members, the resignations of two others and the departure of almost two dozen students from Rollins. It also prompted the AAUP to censure Rollins and, while noting that Rice was far from blameless, to report: "In the committee's judgement, his (Rice's) dismissal eliminated from the faculty a teacher who appears on the one hand to have done more than any other to provoke questioning, discussion, and the spirit of critical inquiry among his students, and on the other hand, to have aimed, with exceptional success, at constructive results both in thought and character." [59]

Black Mountain College, initiated by Rice with the help of three other former faculty from Rollins, was in large part a way to shrug off the heavy hand of upper administration and to give rein to Rice's determination that teaching was best as an open-ended, free flowing and intensely individualized experience in the hands of an interested student and an expert teacher. The precise shaping of the curriculum and the community would come only as additional faculty were hired and students began to arrive.

Two of Rice's visions for the college were among those viewed as "progressive" and among the first to be operationalized, including a commitment to the centrality of artistic experience and emotional development to learning in all disciplines and a preference for democratic governance

shared between faculty and students. Indeed, during its brief (1933 to 1956) and nationally renowned existence, Black Mountain College was best know for its free-wheeling approach to classroom and learning processes, its insistence on individual academic plans and community decision making, and its placement of artistic practices (drawing, sculpting, painting, weaving, print-making, music, etc.) in the center of the curriculum. By hiring recently ousted Bauhaus master teachers, such as Josef Albers and Xanti Schawinski, as well as superb young and idealistic faculty talent, Rice managed to begin a small island of progressive higher education that became a worthy demonstration site concerning the possibilities of post secondary learning.

Students and faculty at Black Mountain College, never more than a group of 100 individuals, formed a 24-hour-a-day learning community. Seminars that ranged from economics to eighteenth century history continued through dinner and on into the night. Some faculty and students worked at vegetable gardening, while others hauled coal from the railroad station to the huge columned buildings that housed faculty and student living quarters and classrooms. Others were the musicians who played for the Friday night college formal dances, and still others became the architects and construction crews for several new buildings. John Andrew Rice held his classes as conversations, moving inside or out and lasting for an hour or many hours. They were officially courses in classics -- Latin and Greek language and philosophy -- but they eventually became wide ranging discussions about the many conundrums of life. Among the other faculty there were lecturers and conversationalists; a wide range was accepted and expected.[60]

When some faculty might sneak off after dinner to be with their families, Rice lingered with a table of students. Later, he might appear at a student's study door and say, "Let's have a chat." Or, "Aldous Huxley's here; come on down and chat with him." Or, "Hey, Thornton Wilder is just getting going; you need to be there."[61] Rice believed that education happened all the time--in and

out of the classroom, in serious or silly moments--especially for those who observed an analyzed what was taking place. He later recalled that at Black Mountain "there was no escape from education. A man taught by the way he walked, the sound of his voice, by every movement. That was what was intended to be, the fulfillment of an old idea, the education of the whole man; by a whole man."[62] While Rice estimated that two-thirds of the education took place outside the classroom, the demanding final examinations (by outside examiners such as Jacques Barzun and Marcel Brueur) and final year projects also required serious academic achievement.

Not surprisingly, Rice sparred with Robert Maynard Hutchins in print on the pages of Harper's magazine during the 1930's, and applauded when John Dewey questioned Alexander Meiklejohn's methods in the same publication.[63] Both Rice and Dewey railed against the idea that all students could and should learn the same things and that all those things could be learned in classic texts. Black Mountain students, heady with the strides they made in maturity and with being part of a learning community, generally agreed with early student Robert Sunley who saw the crucial accomplishment of the Rice approach as its "valuing of the intuitive, inspriational, sensual, taking risks, experiencing, wondering."[64]

By adding a southern site to the collective national urge for academic innovation, Black Mountain College lent support to growing evidence that higher education would fully participate in what could be loosely labeled "the new South." John Andrew Rice, in practice and sometimes in print, added his voice to early twentieth-century educators who debated missions and methods of American higher education in response to the expansion of vocational education and research universities. They borrowed from (or perhaps simply came to the same conclusions as) progressive educators tackling similar issues in the K-12 system; and they took issue not only with the aims of higher education, but also with the administration of the system.

A masterful conversationalist who could readily generate wise and humorous discussion, Rice also was impatient and arrogant in his commitment to the stinging verbal barbs that he viewed as frank discussion. He kept the Black Mountain College community embroiled with faculty terminations, arguments, and perceived insults. Finally, five years after the founding of the college, when Rice apparently fell in love with an 18-year-old student, neither his wife nor his faculty could fall back on his genius and leadership to forgive him. The Black Mountain College faculty insisted he resign in 1940. He did, and he never returned to teaching. Instead, he became a noted writer – primarily of stories that detailed race relations in the South.

Alan Sly, Black Mountain College music professor from 1935 to 1939, captured both Rice and his brand of progressive education, in a memoir recalling,

> My most persistent recollection of those years is the pervasive presence of John Andrew Rice. I can see him now, in his comfortable rocking chair, smoking his pipe, and seeming to relay the style of an Oxford don to a receptive audience. ... The offering and scrutinizing of ideas was at center stage at all times. ... I think the kind of thing that Rice put out at these times was just as important as anything one might have learned in a classroom.[65]

Conclusion

The Progressive era in the South was embedded in political and social circumstances peculiar to the region. However, these characteristics allowed those who were visionary and passionate to be more than they intended to be. As educators and as historians, we have offered both the similarities and the contrasting experiences of two such people who were active creators in this region and during this political era. The nature of both Rice and Bragg as "progressive educators" suggests two major categories harboring such individuals in the South. One category, demonstrated by Bragg, is that of the progressive who is only by circumstance an educator. The other, demonstrated by Rice, is that of an educator, who is only by circumstance progressive. In

reality then, each was an accidental progressive educator—a label that could readily apply to many of those responsible for forging progressive education in the early twentieth century South.

Reared as a northern progressive, Laura Bragg came South to be a librarian and became an accidental educator. She re-focused The Charleston Museum into an engine for social change, educating both blacks and whites during the Jim Crow era. Politically savvy from the moment she arrived in the city, she immediately formed friendships with the city's social elite to insure her vision for the Museum as an educational institution. It was her progressive impulse which framed her appeal for financial funding for her educational program from the state's school superintendent by pointing out that "if Mr. Hope were honestly in favor of this progressive piece of work it would be perfectly easy for him to follow my suggestion."[66] On another occasion she wrote him:

> it seems to me that it would show a very great lack of vision and progressiveness on the part of the State Board to be unwilling to initiate and put through this matter. In fact, I should think you would like to be personally responsible for it. I am quite sure that in twenty years from now, if you do become so, you will be very proud to claim credit for it....I truly believe you will think of it as one of the most important things of your administration as State Superintendent of Schools.[67]

On the other hand, John Andrew Rice always intended to be an educator; however he objected to the progressive label for Black Mountain College or for himself. It seemed too constricting, too prescriptive and doctrinaire. After visiting several progressive schools in the Northeast, he told his friend and fellow Rhodes Scholar, Elmer Davis, "They've got the thing figured out: This is the way to do it; and by God if you don't do it that way, you're just not 'it'....Progressive education when it is stupid, is much more stupid than the other kind."[68]

Rice was true to his Southern roots in his belief that instincts concerning people took precedence over commitment to issues. His skepticism about progressive education did not prevent him from learning from those progressives who he knew personally and admired. These included

John Dewey who visited Black Mountain College on several occasions and impressed Rice with one simple sentence of advice: "As long as you keep your eye on the individual student, you'll be fine."[69] By contrast, Rice had no patience for noted progressive educator Goodwin Watson of Columbia University. After getting to know him at the Rollins Conference on progressive education in 1932, he referred to him as "that Jackass from Columbia."[70]

Bragg was also faithful to the education she had received in the North. One of her primary goals, first as the Museum's librarian and then as its director, was a free library. In what was to be a long twenty year struggle, she wrote Mayor John Grace, "I was brought up in the north where there are public libraries everywhere, and, though my father had a modern library of several thousand volumes, I know that a big part of my education is due to the public library..."[71] She pointed out to Grace: "Perhaps you have always had plenty of books....[but here] when...[the] story hours are over, the children clamor for books about the stories...."[72]

Bragg intended to socialize the Southerners through her educational programs, the "story hours," and the lectures she organized at the Museum. True to the progressive ideal, Bragg saw the people of the South as: "in need of a better comprehension of modern science, a greater understanding of foreign peoples living today, and some approach to an appreciation of the fine arts as applied to life."[73]

Rice, by contrast, saw Black Mountain College as a place for each student to develop in his or her own way, at his or her own pace. But the means and ends of that development were never prescribed. Experience was at the heart of the notion, but experience could take almost any form and could change forms many times. This chaotic approach to education was best characterized by Rice himself when he said, "We want the student to come here and get the opportunity to do what he needs to do, and then leave. That is why we don't stress graduation."[74]

Intellectuals by choice, both were tenacious and determined. Bragg and Rice controlled their worlds with similar techniques, but with different motives. And with a perspective of fifty years or more, one could say that peculiar southern times and circumstances allowed both to be what they came to be....accidental progressive educators. These two progressives, along with many other native and adopted southerners, prove that the region was the Congo, and not the Sahara. In their own place, time, and manner, Rice and Bragg were important and inspiring individuals who personally shaped educational institutions as well as individuals by the force of their progressive passions and visions.

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